

8. Epilogue: From Global Civility to Comparative Imperialisms?

This study has explored the development of a discourse of global civility in selected writings by English travellers to both the Ottoman Empire and the South Pacific. Its insistence on the complexity of cross-cultural encounters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where one looks in vain for the unilateral and clear-cut emanation of power from metropolitan centres in Europe, supplements established post-colonial frameworks. *Representations of Global Civility* thus follows in the wake of scholarship on the Renaissance that opened this era up for outside influences and re-evaluated it in terms of interaction, improvisation and international cultural and commercial traffic. It connects such approaches with eighteenth and nineteenth century travel writing in order to arrive at a thorough and precise historicisation of mutually improving encounters and their changing representations when European powers ceased merely to travel for either curiosity or commercial opportunities. From the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century onwards, Britain emerged as a powerful player in international diplomacy and became a fully-fledged imperial nation. Among the many consequences of this transformation were the increasingly ambivalent representations of cultural difference in English travel accounts of the period, which eventually gave way to a discourse of colonialism.

In addition to providing a counter-narrative to established interpretive patterns of the long eighteenth century, the present study also aims at opening new avenues for enquiry along similar lines. Travel texts, accounts of foreign lands and reports of little known civilisations provide ample opportunity to transpose the journeys of Englishmen to Ottoman lands to a global level and interweave them with analyses of travelogues by those who went to the Persian Empire. For example, the Sherley Brothers went to both realms in the early seventeenth century, but have received only limited critical attention

so far.¹ How did representations of such journeys that circulated in printed form in early modern Britain aid the emergence of a British imperial identity? How do analyses of literary and cultural perspectives on far-flung empires complement our understanding of political conceptualisations of imperial formations? Are there elements of (dis-)continuity that have persisted into the post-colonial and neo-colonial ages of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Such questions need to be asked if cross-cultural research is to break new ground in order to leave behind stifling paradigms predicated upon unilateral action and European agency. Since restrictive notions of interaction continue to dominate debates of what globalisation actually is or when it has begun, theoretical innovations will neither gain traction nor contribute to a profound, lasting and desperately needed ‘decolonisation of the mind,’² in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s words. As a result of colonisation and empire, the centres of contemporary cultural and knowledge production are located in the West and too often perpetuate the sharp distinctions and dichotomous epistemic structures behind the formations they seek to critique. Probably continual calls for critical revaluations of the reductive rigidities inherent in Occidental thought have simply not been sufficient permanently to change concomitant behavioral patterns. It is thus high time to revisit the world’s past empires in order to understand why they provided attractive and desirable models for those who promoted them at a given historical moment. Mere acquisitiveness and the hunger for power are accepted political motives, but they have to be supplemented by literary and cultural perspectives in comparative contexts in order to do critical justice to the sometimes straightforward, and sometimes complicated, constellations that govern contact zones in the long eighteenth century and beyond.

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- 1 Compare: Julia Schleck, *Telling True Tales of Islamic Lands: Forms of Mediation in English Travel Writing, 1575-1630* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2011), 61-92; and Anthony Parr, ‘Foreign Relations in Jacobean England: The Sherley Brothers and the “Voyage of Persia,”’ in Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Michele Willems, eds., *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare’s Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14-31.
 - 2 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 4-34.